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AUTHOR Karlson, Robert E.
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ABSTRACT

The principles used by Tim Gallwey in his books "The Inner Game of Tennis" and "Inner Tennis" can be applied to the teaching and learning of writing. The objective is to overcome mental obstacles which our conscious ego puts in the way of our creative self. Such obstacles as fear, lack of self-confidence, lack of concentration, trying too hard, anger, boredom, and not being able to focus on the main business are common to tennis players and writers. The object is to help the student get the conscious ego out of the way of the creative self. One exercise to accomplish this is focused free writing. Topics for free writing need to have resonance, that is, the subconscious levels of the self need to have something to say. Then the student's objective is to get out of the way, not worrying about grammar, spelling, and syntax (all attempts by the conscious ego to block the creative self) until enough free writing has been done on the subject to allow a friendly conversation with the conscious ego in order to shape the paper as effectively as possible. (TJ)

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Gallwey, Zen, and the Teaching of Writing

Robert E. Karlson
Associate Professor of English
George Mason University
Fairfax, Virginia

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Most of the tennis players that I know have read Tim Gallwey's book, The Inner Game of Tennis, and almost all of them experienced a sense of excitement as they read, because Gallwey seemed to have the answer, and a radically new answer, to the problems with their games, whether it was their serve, backhand, volley, or whatever. The difficulty, Gallwey was saying, was not with their bodies, but with their heads, and he seemed to be offering clear and sensible solutions to the mental obstacles that were preventing them from achieving their potential. I certainly felt this way, but I was even more impressed with Gallwey's second book, Inner Tennis, for there Gallwey appeared to be setting forth a coherent theory of learning which had application to more consequential games than tennis, including the biggest game of all. More particularly, though, I thought that Gallwey's ideas could be especially useful in the teaching of writing, despite the obvious differences between writing a sentence and swinging a racket.

The apparent inspiration for Gallwey's work is Guru Maharaj Ji, the youthful Indian religious teacher who caused quite a stir in America a few years ago with something called The Knowledge, a rather flashy technique of meditation. I do not have much interest in judging someone else's guru, especially since quite a few people have had some unkind things to say about mine, but I have the strong impression that in this case the pupil has reached a higher level than the master. What is a little puzzling about Gallwey's work is that, although he describes some Yogic practices, the main lines of his theories are not strongly influenced by Indian thought. The obvious influence on Gallwey is Zen, the Japanese

branch of Buddhism which, as is well known, has as a basic concern the breaking down of the conceptions of the ego, and indeed the ego itself, so that life can be experienced directly, immediately, and fully.

The objective of the inner game, says Gallwey, is to overcome the mental obstacles which prevent us from achieving our full potential. Our own minds, he asserts, prevent us from achieving anything more than a small proportion of what we could otherwise attain. Gallwey gives a detailed classification of mental obstacles, too detailed to give completely, but I will indicate the most significant ones and also give some examples drawn from writing rather than from tennis. The first and in many ways the most important mental obstacle is fear, fear of many sorts--fear of not improving, of looking bad, of losing one's self-esteem, of being rejected, of making errors, of not meeting the expectations of oneself and others. I have experienced most of these fears myself, and every teacher knows that these fears are real enough for most students. One of the most difficult to deal with is the fear of losing self-esteem, for students often fail to make much effort, because if they don't, then they need have no fear of judgments rendered either by themselves or by their teachers.

A second obstacle is the lack of self-confidence. Students easily become convinced that they have nothing to say, that they are indeed terrible writers, that they can't write exposition or argument, and so on. Frequently a third obstacle, lack of concentration, emerges during the writing process itself. The student's mind won't stay on the subject or he cannot concentrate for more than a few minutes at a time or deeply enough to get below the surface of the topic. Another common problem is

trying too hard; the harder the student tries, the harder it is to get words to flow or ideas to come.

Compulsive students often get no pleasure out of writing because they are perfectionists, and since perfection in writing is rarely attainable or even recognizable, they are never at ease with what they are doing. At the opposite pole is the writer who quickly becomes frustrated when she cannot say what she wants to say immediately and so quickly gives up. For the writer with a lot of aggression, a common problem is anger if things do not go well--anger at the teacher, the typewriter, anger at anybody who tries to help.

Then there is the writer who can't develop any interest in what he is doing, who quickly gets bored--bored with the whole idea of writing, bored with working hard, bored even with the most interesting of subjects. Finally, there is the student whose mind is always busy with abstruse problems of punctuation or with grammatical questions of one sort or another to the extent that he cannot focus on the main business of writing.

These are some of the psychological problems which beset not only tennis players and writers, but all of us in most activities to some degree or in some fashion. Obviously, there are more serious psychological problems that confront some writers, but they can't be handled, or shouldn't be, by English teachers. Incidentally, I have heard that some tennis professionals feel that Gallwey's methods work well with some students, but not with others, notably the aggressive player who uses tennis as a means of venting anger at spouses, jobs, or the world. They do not want to become tennis players; they just want to hit something as hard as possible. In my experience, by the way, the widespread notion that whacking tennis balls helps to reduce aggression in the rest of behavior

is simply not true; however, I do think that it is quite possible that writing can help reduce levels of aggression if the process involves the student at a deep enough level.

Before I attempt to show how some of Gallwey's ideas can be adapted so that they can be of use in dealing with some of the psychological barriers that afflict writers, I should say that there must be an understandably strong temptation on the part of many to dismiss his theories as pop Zen. It is true that the most effective method of dealing with the problems that I have outlined here may well be the practice of Zen or some other meditative discipline--in fact, that is precisely what I do think--but there is little point in dreaming of sending our students off to Kapleau's Zen center in Rochester. The fact is that Gallwey's methods do work; what is also true is that we have to recognize the limitations imposed not only by the classroom setting, but also by the cultural conditioning of our students. I have already mentioned one of the psychological problems of the writer--excessive expectations-- and the same often applies to teachers. It has been pointed out before, but it perhaps cannot be pointed out often enough, that there are no panaceas, not for writing, not for anything else.

Gallwey begins his discussion of inner tennis by pointing out that all tennis players have a minimum of two selves, a fact that can be quickly verified by the continuing dialogue that goes on as they play: "C'mon, stupid, when are you going to meet the ball out in front," or "Dammit, there you go again, not getting sideways--no wonder you're lousy," or "I'm not very steady--I hope he misses soon, because if he doesn't I will...."

Gallwey points out that if there is somebody talking, then presumably somebody is listening, a self that the talking self seems to have little confidence in, since it delivers to it a stream of commands, complaints, and judgments, often couched in bad language. The first self is the conscious ego, what Wittgenstein called "the little man in the head." The second self is the body, and it is only, says Gallwey, when we manage to shut Self 1 up that the body is able to perform up to its capacity. When Self 1 is quiet, the body can often perform in extraordinary fashion as body merges with action. This experience is now referred to by psychologists as "flow." Mihaly Csikszentimihalyi, in his book Beyond Boredom and Anxiety, which is a study of the flow experience, says that it is "the holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement....In the flow state, action follows upon action according to an internal logic that seems to need no conscious intervention by the actor. He experiences it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which he is in control of his actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment, between stimulus and response, or between past, present, and future." Arthur Ashe has a nice expression for the experience; he calls it "being in the zone." "Being in the zone" can occur only when Self 1 stops pouring out instructions that result in tensions, anxiety, and uncertainty.

According to Gallwey, the first principle of the inner game is that one must learn to trust the body or Self 2, since the body can learn rapidly and easily if Self 1 does not interfere with a stream of instructions. The obvious question is whether or not there is a parallel between Self 2 and the writer. Does the writer have two selves, analogous to those of the tennis player? The test is a simple one, and it is the same test that

Gallwey uses. Is there a dialogue going on between the rational ego and the creative self? It seems to me that most of the time there surely is, and it is Self 1 that erects all the psychological barriers that have been described--fear, lack of self confidence, lack of concentration, and so forth. These problems can hardly be ascribed to the creative self, although as Gallwey probably does not emphasize enough, there is not just a one way connection. If, for example, the body is tired, Self 1 develops more concerns that it would otherwise have, and if the writer is tired or ill, surely the creative self cannot function as freely.

How can the creative self function free of a constant flow of advice on such matters as punctuation, word choice, topic sentences, unity, and coherence? Such advice is often judgmental, since Self 1 naturally keeps thinking in terms of good and bad, and the consequence is anxiety, fear, tightening up. Shutting up the conscious ego and allowing the creative self to function is not easy, no easier than it is for a tennis player, but it seems to me that much can be done to still that drunken monkey, the ego, so that creation can take place. One does not learn to write, just as one does not learn to make, say, an overhead smash, by listening to a set of instructions and then attempting to apply them, becuase just as the overhead involves an extraordinary number of muscles that simply cannot respond to abstract commands, so writing involves an even more complex process that no set of abstractions can possibly cover. Furthermore, the most significant part of the process of creation goes on at a level of consciousness that abstractions cannot really effect. Abstractions are, however, useful during the process of revision, because, unlike a tennis swing, the words sit nicely still on the page and can be changed as the swing cannot after the ball has left the racket. The fact that the

Harbrace Handbook is the largest selling textbook in America is testimony to the fact that most of us have not only a slight idea of what happens when we write, but that we have only a casual acquaintance with the processes of learning and growth.

In addition to the assumption that abstract concepts are useless at the central stage of the learning process, Gallwey points out that in America a very high value is put on trying hard. The student is told over and over again, either directly or by implication, that if he tries harder, if he works with greater intensity, then results will naturally follow such virtuous behavior. Trying hard, however, only brings into play all the fears and anxieties already mentioned. Gallwey makes an interesting distinction between trying and effort. Trying, he says, is Self 1 asserting itself, whereas effort brings Self 2 into play, that is, through effort we allow the body or the creative self to function, and through experience, it learns to function at the level appropriate to the task at hand.

Gallwey has a number of interesting exercises which he uses in the attempt to get tennis players to quiet Self 1 so that the body can function freely. These include, for example, having the player say "bounce" when the ball bounces on his side of the court, and "hit" when he swings the racket, or listening to the sound as the ball bounces on the court and again when it hits the racket. In a more complex exercise, he has the player imagine that the net and the court form a kind of three-dimensional canvas in which each new trajectory of the ball is seen as a new line in a drawing. This last exercise, of course, is designed not only to divert Self 1, but also to add fresh interest to the game. Players using these methods have observed over and over that the ball seems to slow down and even to get larger, which obviously makes it easier to hit.

The obvious question, of course, is how Gallwey's principles can be used to help the writer still his anxieties and sharpen his perceptions. The latter is something that I can't deal with now, and I am just making a beginning in the former. What I have done so far is somewhat tentative, but I am persuaded that the principles are correct; it is merely a matter of finding the most effective way of applying them. Basic is the assumption that we should give major emphasis in the writing process to focused free writing, not as warming up exercises, but as central to the process. In sum, much of the student's time will be spent simply writing whatever comes into his head on his topic and, as his mind floats away on its natural path of association, he brings himself back easily to the subject, taking careful note of the kind of associations that led him away from his topic, for often they can shed light on how he feels about the subject.

I will say more about this process, but first I need to emphasize that the teacher must assign topics that have not relevance, but resonance, that is to say, topics that the subconscious levels of the self have some knowledge of. If the creative self, or subconscious, has nothing to say, then growth does not occur, for the writing will almost inevitably be forced and artificial, and the opposite of genuine learning will take place. This does not, as may first appear, mean limiting topics to such matters as sex and relations with parents, for the psychic life of our students and indeed of ourselves is hardly so limited.

The first step in the procedure should take place in class. After I have suggested a general topic for a paper, I ask the students to sit quietly for a minute or two, eyes closed, and as they sit, to simply be

aware of their breathing. The object, of course, is to get their minds off themselves. Next, with the eyes still closed, I ask them to sit five minutes or so and free associate, after which they do some focused free writing on a topic that occurs to them to determine whether or not there is any emotional or other pressure on the subject. If not, I ask them to try something else. We often tell our students to write about what they are interested in or what they know about, but such advice often does not help much. If, however, when they start free associating, feelings, ideas, images, and experiences start coming to the surface, then they know they have a topic.

When they have arrived at a subject the same process is repeated, but now the free writing goes on for at least fifteen minutes. I emphasize that they are to make no judgments whatever about what comes up--they are not to judge the quality of the sentences, the interest of the ideas, the shallowness or depth of feelings--they are just to let the pen ride.

Depending upon the length and complexity of the assignment, I ask students to do as many such focused free writings as they can outside of class, repeating the procedure described above, but sometimes varying it by just sitting with the eyes closed for fifteen or twenty minutes before they start. During these periods of just sitting, ideas and feelings often come up which are pretty exciting, and the student goes back to the process of free writing with excitement and interest rather than with a sense of boredom and strain. I should say at this point that I think that this process is not only natural, but that it facilitates intellectual and emotional growth. It is hardly a new idea that the development of writing ability can't be separated from maturation, but it is a truth we often forget. It is my belief that this process facilitates growth because it allows the creative self to function on many levels of the psyche.

When the student has done enough free writing on his topic, he can then get engaged in a reasonably friendly dialogue with Self 1, becuause many of his anxieties have been reduced by the fact that he has written a lot, some of it almost bound to be of interest to him, which gives him a real motive to shape his paper as effectively as he can. It is only now that the student need start using abstract ideas about writing, abstractions about such matters as thesis statements, sentence variety, paragraph development, unity, and so on.

I do not wish here to get into such complex matters as grading and right attitude of teachers toward students. However, I do want to say a little about what seems to me to be appropriate attitudes toward writing problems. Almost every teacher has observed that students seldom look seriously at the marks on their papers so that they seldom profit from them. The reason most of the time, I think, is not that students are indifferent to learning, but simply that they are afraid to face the reality of the mistakes. They glance at the marks and comments, get anxious, and thrust the papers inside their notebooks. Rewriting helps, no doubt about it, but it does not get to the heart of the problem, which is the student's fear of judgments. Gallwey has a basic method that he employs with tennis players. If, for example, they are consistently hitting the ball over the baseline, he asks them simply to observe where the ball hits; he does not tell them to modify their swing, but just to keep noting where the ball goes. Almost inevitably the body begins to adjust, the swing is modified, and the ball starts dropping into the court. We learn by error and mistake, and somehow we have to persuade our students of this truth--that there are no bad writers, just as there are no bad tennis players--there

are just writers and tennis players at different stages of development. This involves much, for it means that we really have to stop seeing not only our students, but ourselves, our colleagues, our schools, in categories of good and bad. If we want change and growth in our students, we have to be able to accept the fact that we are engaged in the same process. If we can, it becomes much easier to stop communicating negative feelings by tone, gesture, word, or whatever.

I suppose that it is obvious that I find Gallwey's work exciting, and I think it has many more implications, especially for ways in which students and teachers can be made more aware of their inner and outer worlds, which finally is what makes them not only better writers but richer human beings. For now, though, I can only repeat that I think that his basic premises about the learning process are true, and that from whatever direction we come, or whatever methods we use, his ideas can be profoundly helpful.